

The Veil Unveiled: The Hijab in Modern Culture

Faegheh Shirazi

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Finally, the study of hijab has come of age. After Shirazi's book, no one will be able to argue that "the" hijab means any one thing divorced from its context. In six chapters, Shirazi investigates the "semantic versatility of the veil" in western popular culture, Saudi advertising, Iranian and Indian poetry and films, and for Iranian, Iraqi, and UAE women soldiers. Not surprisingly, the veil means different things in different contexts, and Shirazi's book is a rich study of this diversity. She reinforces her arguments by the wealth of photographs that depict veiled women in multiple contexts.

Just how different the veil's semantics can be is highlighted in chapter 1: "Veiled Images in Advertising." In this fascinating comparative study of the veil's use in western and Saudi advertising, Shirazi shows that its meaning in an ad depends on the target audience. So when advertisers target western middle-class male consumers, the veil is presented as an exotic and sexualizing piece of cloth. In a 1996 commercial for Chrysler's Jeep Cherokee shot in Morocco, a veiled woman is seen smiling and admiring the Jeep – sending the message that "if he buys the Jeep ... He may even win the admiration of the most inaccessible of women, the woman with the veil." Western exotica,

like *Playboy*, also rely on this use to titillate the male gaze, as the author details in chapter 2.

When the target audience is western female, advertisers rely on racist stereotyping of Muslim women as oppressed. A 1989 Virginia Slims advertisement pictured a turbaned man sitting with three women in headscarves. The caption reads: "The Sultan of Bundi Had Nothing Against Women. He Thought Everyone Should Own Two or Three." Undemeath the woman farthest from the man is an image of a cigarette pack, with the caption: "You've Come a Long Way Baby." As Shirazi points out, this strategy reassures women consumers that, as western women, they are nothing like these oppressed and veiled women. And, if they smoke Virginia Slims they assuredly will not be like the veiled women. Chapter 2 also finds this negative stereotype in the political cartoons of American exotica, in the very same issues that use the veil as a piece of exotica.

Not surprisingly, Saudi advertising uses the veil to sell products. Shirazi examines ads for sanitary napkins, which use the veil to show religion and purity; for toothpaste, which depict veiled women as good mothers, and for expensive watches, which romanticize the veil. Shirazi's awareness of such different meanings of the veil is an example of the sophistication she brings to her subject.

Chapter 3 investigates the "Cinematics of the Veil," in Iranian, Indian, and one western film. This chapter shows that the veil can have opposite meanings, depending upon the social context. In Iran, where the veil is compulsory, films cannot show unveiled women and, by extension, women inside their homes, where they do not ordinarily veil. Iranian filmmakers get around the censors by ingenious thematic devices, such as frequently swinging to an open window overlooking a busy street while depicting a scene between a husband and a wife in their house. Shirazi concludes that the veil in Iranian films is set up to deny the gaze.

Not so in India, where the veil is used to titillate. While Indian movies also are subject to censorship, as in Iran, Indian filmmakers are given more latitude in that they must avoid only sexually explicit scenes. Thus they use the veil to create sexual tension. Shirazi examines several Indian movies, where the lyrics or plot turn on the veil's sexualized use. The chapter closes with a study of Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Sheltering Sky* (1991), which also uses the veil to titillate. The latter study feels tacked on and does not add depth to the argument.

Shirazi is an expatriate Iranian living in the United States, so it is not surprising that veiling in Iran is an important aspect of her book. She inter-

sperses personal anecdotes in a very effective manner. Her irritation at having to wear the *chador* when going home clearly compelled her to study the veil.

Chapter 4 analyzes the veil in Iranian politics. Even in Iran, where veiling has been compulsory since 1980, the veil has no fixed meaning. The chapter starts with a look at the compulsory unveiling that took place under Reza Shah in the 1920s and 1930s. For Reza Shah, the veil symbolized backwardness and unveiling symbolized modernity and progress. Shirazi notes that Iranian women's status did not improve dramatically under Reza Shah's laws, for his unveiling campaign was not an attempt to liberate women; rather, it was part of an image makeover: "Iran must only look Western."

With the Islamic Revolution's rise of supporters, the hijab's meaning shifted to that of a symbol of "progress," of a liberated woman who was not a "painted Western doll" like an unveiled woman. Here, Shirazi's study highlights the veil's political uses and how it can so easily become a site of symbolic struggle between ideologies. The chapter ends with a look at the use of hijab to mobilize Iranian women to assist in the war effort with Iraq. A number of postage stamps depict *chador*-clad women holding guns, making a link between hijab, jihad, and martyrdom. Perhaps this is the source of the disturbing western tendency to make such visual links, showing once more how important context is in understanding the veil's meaning. During the Iran-Iraq war, linking hijab with jihad was a way to mobilize the patriotism felt by Iranian women. In the West, such a linkage feeds into western racist stereotypes of Islam as an inherently violent religion. It would have been useful if Shirazi had explored these relationships.

Chapter 5 explores a new meaning of the veil for Iranian and Arab women soldiers and police in Iran, Iraq, and the United Arab Emirates. Their uniforms comply with Shari'ah requirements for women's dress: loose fitting outfits and heads covered with scarves. Shirazi argues that using the veil in women's military uniforms is a way to comply with the Shari'ah's gender segregation requirements while at the same time answering a modern state's need for soldiers and police. These women can deal with women offenders, thus upholding the society's practices of gender segregation. She also suggests that requiring the veil is a way to remove objections to this kind of role for women in conservative societies.

The last chapter investigates the "Literary Dynamics of the Veil." Shirazi explores the different meanings the veil has held among Iraqi, Indian, Uzbeki, and Iranian poets and authors. She categorizes the writers

into two groups: those who endorse the veil, like the Iraqi poet al-Hajj ‘Abd al-Hussayn al-Azri (1880-1954), and those who reject it as a symbol of oppression, like Uzbek songs or the Iranian poet Parvin E’tesami (1907-41). A subcategory of the latter are male poets whose poems use the veil as metonyms for captivity, unbearable separation from the Eternal Beloved (God), or ignorance. There is even a surprise study of some poems by Ayatollah Khomeini that reject the veil – but not as a garment women should wear, rather as a metonym for the ignorance of those who would study philosophy. Can there be a more ironic example of the “semantic versatility of the veil?”

Shirazi’s book is an extremely useful addition to the sociological study of Muslim women. I would have liked to see her push her analysis to a deeper level. Unfortunately, it is news to some people that there is not “one” single meaning of the veil (usually that it is a symbol of oppression); however, there are other readers for whom this is not news. Throughout, I had a nagging question that I would have liked explored: The veil means different things to different people in different cultures – what next? What do these different semantics really signify? Moreover, in her following of Mernissi’s interpretation of the veil in Muslim contexts as signifying “women as *fitna*” (sources of chaos), Shirazi imposes a singular meaning of her own. Absent are the voices of veiled women themselves. Shirazi’s feminist analysis of the veil does not quite reach the promise of her argument of “semantic versatility,” but at least she has laid a firm foundation for moving in that direction.

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